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Beethoven

LIVES
OF
CELEBRATED MUSICIANS.

BY
GEORGE HOGARTH.

BEETHOVEN.

LONDON:

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THE following Memoir appeared in the Second and Third numbers of the POLYTECHNIC JOURNAL, and is the commencement of a series of biographical Sketches of Musicians who are not only celebrated as artists, but interesting in their lives and characters. Each of these memoirs, immediately after its insertion in the above Journal, will be published separately, in the same form as the present, till the series is completed.

LIFE OF BEETHOVEN.

THE biography of great artists is one of the most important branches of the literature of Art. A knowledge of their lives and fortunes is interesting to those who regard their works with delight and admiration; and much light is thrown upon their genius and character as *artists*, by the circumstances of their personal history, and an observation of their dispositions, habits, and character as *men*.

There is no musician whose biography would be more interesting under the one of these points of view, and more instructive under the other, than the illustrious BEETHOVEN. But an account of his life yet remains a desideratum in musical literature. Till within a very recent period, all that was known of him personally was contained in the bald German pamphlet of Schlosser, and the interesting, but excessively slight, sketch by the Chevalier Seyfried, prefixed to a posthumous work, entitled '*Beethoven's Studien in Generalbasse,*' or Studies in Thoroughbass, Counterpoint, and the Theory of Composition, published at Vienna in 1832. This publication, we must observe in passing, considered as a book of instruction by Beethoven, would do no honour to his memory; but in truth these 'Studies' were a parcel of his juvenile exercises when he was studying under Albrechtsberger, found, along with a great deal of other rubbish, among his papers, after his death, and vamped up and published by the Vienna music-seller who bought up all the manuscripts he had left, as a trading speculation. It is to this enterprising publisher, too, that we are indebted for the appearance of various other post-

humorous compositions of Beethoven, particularly certain Quartets which have been lately attempted at some of the London concerts, to the admiration of a number of our *dilettanti* (though the majority, we believe, found them incomprehensible,) but which are now understood in Germany, by those best acquainted with the subject, to have been manufactured from scraps and fragments found in Beethoven's portfolios, and never intended by him to see the light.

A French translation of Beethoven's 'Studies,' by M. Fétis, was published at Paris in 1833. This translation is much more valuable than the original, as it is enriched with copious notes by the translator, one of the most learned and scientific musicians in Europe, in which (among other interesting matter) he points out the numerous errors, both in precept and example, committed by Beethoven in the kind of treatise which he drew up from the instructions of his master. The rules, taken down, of course, from Albrechtsberger's mouth, are sometimes so obscurely, inaccurately, and even unintelligibly expressed, that the pupil evidently did not comprehend their scope; and, in the examples, instances of bad harmony, false answers to subjects of fugue, and other errors, are pointed out in almost every page. These confused precepts and erroneous examples are calculated, in the original publication, merely to puzzle and bewilder the student; but they become valuable and instructive when accompanied by the acute comments of M. Fétis. They throw, too, a curious light on Beethoven's musical education, and its influence on his character as an artist. "Beethoven," says Fétis, "was not, as has been supposed, unacquainted with the science of music; but the science was too circumscribed for his views. Though, in his works he wished to respect it, yet it thwarted his most congenial ideas; and in this sense it may be said that it never became familiar to him. Many phrases which fell from his pen in the course of the curious exercises now given to the public, afford evidence of his desire to imbue himself with this science, and of the discouragement which he sometimes derived from it. It is

doubtless to this double effect on his mind that we must ascribe Beethoven's efforts, in several of his great compositions, to rise to the highest combinations of counterpoint and fugue, and the dryness which such efforts have given to those productions, as may be particularly remarked in his Masses, and in his oratorio of the 'Mount of Olives.'" This collection of Beethoven's studies, therefore, is interesting as being at once the history of his education and of his genius.

The above are the sources from which all the meagre biographical memoirs of Beethoven that have yet appeared have been drawn. They afford information respecting the generally known circumstances of his career as an artist, which are few and simple, but they are silent as to all those particulars of his private life which are necessary to enable us, as it were, to form his personal acquaintance. This, the most interesting branch of his biography, could be furnished only by those intimate friends who enjoyed his most familiar intercourse. Beethoven, who withdrew himself more and more from the world as his increasing deafness deepened his melancholy and heightened his disinclination for society, was accessible only to a very few. The public admired his unrivalled works as they appeared in quick succession, but knew little or nothing about the author. He rarely emerged from his seclusion; and, we have been told, was hardly known, even by sight, in the city where he passed almost the whole of his life.

Lately, however, this want of information regarding the private life and character of Beethoven has been in a considerable measure supplied by two of his friends, who were well qualified to do so; the celebrated Ferdinand Ries, so long resident and so highly respected in this country, and Dr Wegeler, an eminent physician of Bonn, Beethoven's townsman and his friend from childhood. Ries, as is well known to musicians, was Beethoven's principal and favourite pupil. A few weeks before his own death, and aware of its rapid approach, Ries was desirous to leave a memorial of his illustrious master; and his last occupation was that of drawing up a sketch

of his reminiscences. The manuscript was committed to the care of Wegeler, who prepared it for publication, with additional matter of his own; and the result of their joint labours appeared at Coblenz last year, under the title of '*Biographische Notizen über Ludwig van Beethoven*,' or, Biographical Notices of Beethoven.

This little book ought to appear in an English dress, and we are surprised that it has not yet done so, as it would be read with great interest and pleasure by every musician. Our present purpose is to avail ourselves of its contents, as well as various things in the correspondence between Goethe and Zelter, and in several of the foreign journals, in drawing up a brief sketch of Beethoven, containing particulars which will be new to most of our readers. We shall take it for granted, however, that they are acquainted with those occurrences of his life which have long been before the public.

Beethoven was born at Bonn, in December 1770. It has been said by a respectable authority (Choron and Fayolle's *Dictionnaire des Musiciens*), and, consequently, often repeated, that he was a natural son of Frederick William the Second, King of Prussia. We find that Beethoven himself was aware of this story. In a letter to Wegeler, written in October 1826, a few months before his death, he says: "I have long heard of this, but I have taken the firm resolution never to write about myself, or to answer anything that is said about me. I willingly leave to you the care of vindicating to the world the honour of my parents, especially my mother." The story, indeed, is a gross and absurd falsehood; and Dr Wegeler, by his details respecting Beethoven's birth and parentage, does not leave it a vestige of foundation.

At the age of fifteen Beethoven was appointed organist of the electoral chapel at Bonn, and, soon afterwards, the Elector's chamber musician. When Haydn, returning from his first visit to London, passed through Bonn, the young musician showed him a Cantata which he had written, and of which he desired the illustrious veteran's opinion. Haydn praised it highly, and advised the author to pursue a career which he had so well begun.

This piece, however, was never published, or even performed; being found too difficult, particularly for the wind instruments. He thus showed, at the very outset, that disregard of mechanical facilities which has always been an impediment to the satisfactory performance of his music. At this period of his life he produced many compositions, most of which remained in manuscript, and all of them were rejected by himself from the series of his works: his *opera prima* being a set of Trios for the piano-forte, violin, and violoncello, published at Vienna in 1795, and now in the hands of every musician.

Notwithstanding the favourable beginning of Beethoven's acquaintance with Haydn, their subsequent intercourse was less agreeable. Beethoven was sent by the Elector of Cologne to study under the greatest musician of the age; but they did not suit each other, and Haydn got rid of an untractable scholar by turning him over to Albrechtsberger. Haydn, it seems, desired that Beethoven should acknowledge himself as his pupil, and so describe himself in his earliest publications. Beethoven refused, saying, that, to be sure, he had got a few lessons from Haydn, but had never learned anything from him. When Beethoven had finished his first work, the set of Trios we have just mentioned, he played them at Prince Lichnowsky's, before a party of the principal musicians in Vienna. Haydn was present among the rest, and joined in the applause bestowed by the company on these charming productions. He, however, took the author aside, and advised him, most unaccountably, not to publish the third of the set, the well-known Trio in C minor. Beethoven, who knew well that this was the best of the three, paid no respect to the advice; and when he found his own opinion confirmed by the judgment of the public, he conceived the notion, which never afterwards left him, that Haydn had been actuated by a spirit of jealous rivalry. This he never forgave, nor did he ever lose an opportunity of making Haydn and his music the subject of sarcastic remarks and criticisms.

Beethoven submitted to Albrechtsberger's authority with little more patience than to that of Haydn. This master was a profound theorist, and taught the science in all its scholastic rigour; a method of tuition quite unsuitable to the modern state of the art. It is easy to imagine the impetuous pupil forced to bend under the yoke of antiquated rules which he felt to be mere pedantry, and was continually led, by his ardent imagination, to disregard. He was constantly, therefore, committing *errors*, which his teacher as constantly endeavoured to correct. Hence many disputes and some squabbles, though the scholar never lost sight of the respect and esteem which he owed to his venerable instructor. He completed his course, and carefully preserved the exercises he wrote under the eye of his master; scribbling upon them, however, many a sarcasm against theorists and their precepts. These are the exercises which (as already mentioned) were vamped up as a trading speculation into a posthumous work. It was a very improper publication, but still it is curious, as showing the young musician's contempt for some of the tasks which old square-toes imposed upon him. There is a chapter on *Canon*, for instance, containing examples of this kind of composition in all its absurd and puzzling varieties. In his enumeration of these varieties, he mentions "the numerical and enigmatic Canons, which, like everything that partakes of the nature of a riddle, are easier to invent than to solve, and seldom yield any compensation for the time and trouble bestowed upon them. In former times (he adds), people took a pride in racking their brains with such contrivances; *but the world is now grown wiser!*" — "What good," he afterwards says, "can result from all this? *Multum clamoris, parum lanæ!* Possibly I may try my hand at it some of these days, when I have nothing of a more reasonable nature to occupy my time. At present, thank Heaven, I am not in that predicament, and it will be a pretty long while, I suspect, before I am." After giving some examples of the manner in which the use of discords is restricted according to the rules of severe counterpoint,

he says:—" *Per parenthesin*. I do not think I have committed high treason; and I hope the high and mighty lords, the big-wigs in the Elysian fields, will not look askance upon me for having taken a few liberties in the introduction or suppression of dissonances. Natural melody has been my object; I have endeavoured to write as simply as possible; and I bow to the judgment of sound reason and good taste. Whatever is easy to sing, easy to invent, and easy to play, cannot be wrong. The only reason for imposing so many fetters upon us was to prevent us from writing anything contrary to the order of nature, anything impracticable for the human voice. He who adheres to these principles has nothing to fear. *Satis pro peccatis*."—In the chapter on Imitation, after a number of examples of this species of figure, he adds the following remark:—"There are, besides, a great many kinds of *Imitation* about which my predecessors* have made a great pother;—inverted imitation, retrograde imitation, imitation upside down, augmented, diminished, interrupted, *in arsin et thesin*, &c. As I wished to know something of these follies, my master told me to consult Marpurg; but I have no great curiosity on the subject. I shall make use of them when opportunity offers: if my phrase is such that an imitation of it by retrograde movement will have a good effect, well and good; if not, well and good too."

In conversation, too, among his musical friends, Beethoven took pleasure in ridiculing the strict precepts of the schools. When they ventured to point out any infringement of them in his compositions, he used to treat them as pedants. When in good humour on such occasions, he would rub his hands and exclaim, laughing heartily, "Oh, yes, yes—you are quite astonished, and at your wit's end, because you cannot find this in one of your treatises on harmony!"

* And his successors also. The last great work on the subject, Cherubini's *Cours de Contrepoint et de Fugue*, contains an elaborate chapter on *Imitation*, full of "these follies," as Beethoven properly calls them; and, not satisfied with this, the author, like Albrechtsberger, desires his readers to consult Marpurg.

"One day," says Ries, "when we were taking a walk together, I spoke of two *consecutive fifths* in one of his first set of violin quartets (that in C minor), which produced a striking and beautiful effect. Beethoven did not recollect the passage, and would have it that I was mistaken in saying that there were fifths in it. As he usually carried music-paper in his pocket, I asked him for a bit, and wrote down the passage in four parts. Beethoven seeing that I was right, said, "Well, who has prohibited the use of fifths like these?" I was at a loss how to take the question. He repeated it several times, till at last I answered, greatly surprised at his putting it—"Bless me! they are forbidden by the very fundamental rules of harmony!" Still he insisted on knowing by whom: I said, "By Marpurg, Kirnberger, Fux, every theorist who has ever written on the subject." "Well," cried Beethoven, "*they* may have forbidden them, but *I* allow them!"

Rossini, who, notwithstanding the nonsense that has been written to the contrary, knew the rules as well as anybody, has been an audacious violator of them. He was a careless student, and used to annoy his master, the venerable Padre Mattei, as much as Beethoven did Albrechtsberger, trusting for his harmonical effects more to his own perceptions than to the *dicta* of theorists. When, in looking over his scores, he observed an infringement of some rule, instead of correcting it, he would mark it with a cross, writing on the margin, "*Per soddissfazione de' pedanti*"—"For the satisfaction of the pedants!" The best and soundest rules—even those which are susceptible of the most general application—must sometimes yield to the impulse of that high order of genius which can "snatch a grace beyond the reach of art:" but the frequent disregard of the laws of harmony, as established and taught in the schools, which we find in the works of modern musicians, is in a great measure the fault of these laws themselves, many of which are no longer applicable to the practice of composition. We cannot, indeed, conceive anything more absurd than the present system of scholastic discipline

to which the young musician is subject. After his genius has been cramped and confined by a long course of precepts, restrictions, and prohibitions, founded on the practice of the seventeenth century, he is told that most of them are antiquated and obsolete, and that there is no longer any occasion to mind them. Did it ever enter into the head of a teacher of that art which has been happily called "the poetry of motion," that the best way to arrive at ease, grace, and agility, was to make his pupil begin, and continue for a long time, to dance in fetters?

Beethoven's unhappy malady, deafness, which so deeply affected his mind, and must have had no small influence on the character of his music, appears to have attacked him at an early age. In the following interesting passage from one of his letters to Wegeler, dated at Vienna in June 1800, he says that his deafness had been gradually increasing for three years.

"You desire to know something of my situation. Well, it is not so much amiss. During the last year, Lichnowsky, however incredible it may seem to you, has been a warm friend. If we have had any little misunderstandings, they have only served to strengthen our friendship. He has assigned me a pension of 600 florins a-year,* which I can draw so long as I have not found a place that will suit me. I can find for every one of my works six or seven publishers, and more if I choose. They no longer think of cheapening my goods: I fix my price, and it is paid. This, you see, is a fine thing. For example, I find a friend in difficulty, and my purse does not enable me to assist him; but I have only to sit down to my desk, and I can help him immediately. I am living more economically than formerly. Were I to make up my mind to remain here permanently, I should have a certain day allotted me every year for a concert. I have already had several; but unhappily

* The florin is nominally about two shillings English; but, from the depreciation of the Austrian paper currency, it seems to have been frequently of not more than half of the above value. We may estimate this pension at between 40*l.* and 50*l.* sterling.

the envious fiend, ill-health, has deranged the men on my chess-board—that is, my hearing has been getting weaker and weaker every day for these three years past.

* * * * *

“I may truly say that I pass my life miserably. For two years I have shunned society, for I cannot go about saying to everybody, *I am deaf*. Had I followed any other art it might have done; but, in mine, it is an intolerable infliction. And then, my enemies, who are not few, what would they say if they knew it? To give you an idea of this incredible deafness, I may tell you that at the theatre I am obliged to get quite close to the orchestra in order to hear the performers. If I am at any distance, I cannot even hear the high sounds of the voices and the instruments. I am surprised that people have not yet perceived my infirmity; but as I was always somewhat abstracted, everything is set down to absence of mind. When a person speaks softly I can scarcely hear him: I hear the sounds; but not the words. And yet if any one speaks loud I feel it insupportable. What will come of this, God only knows! I am often tempted to curse my own existence. Plutarch has taught me resignation. I desire, if possible, to bear my lot with fortitude; but I must look for many moments in my life when I shall be the most wretched of God’s creatures. I pray you to speak of this to nobody, not even to Leonora: * I mention it to you as an inviolable secret. Should I remain in this state I will come to you next spring. You shall hire me a cottage in some pretty spot, and I will turn peasant for six months, which may perhaps do me some good. Resignation—what a miserable remedy! but it is the only one I have.”

Eighteen months afterwards, in November 1801, he writes again to Wegeler on the same subject. After speaking of various remedies—blisters, galvanism, &c.—that had been recommended to him, he says:—

“At present my life is somewhat more agreeable,

* Madame Wegeler.

since I go a little more into society. You could hardly believe what a melancholy life I have led for these two years past. My deafness pursues me everywhere like a spectre. Shunning mankind, as I have done, I must have appeared a misanthrope, which I am far from being. This change has been produced by an amiable and charming girl, whom I love, and who loves me. Hence the few moments of happiness I have had for two years; and I now feel, for the first time, that I could find happiness in marriage. But alas! she is above me in rank, and besides, marriage for me at present is out of the question—I must labour to gain an independence. Had it not been for my deafness, I should, by this time, have roamed over half the world. That would have been the life for me: I have no greater enjoyment than in exercising my art, and displaying its splendour in public. Do not believe that I could be happy with you—what could make me any happier? Even your affectionate care would pain me. I should every moment read your compassion in your countenance, and I should only feel the more miserable.”

This cruel malady continued to increase till at last his deafness was nearly total. Nearly ten years afterwards we again find him writing (in 1810,) to Wegeler:—

“For some years I have ceased to lead a tranquil and retired life, and have been dragged by force into the great world; but I have never acquired a taste for it—quite the contrary. Nevertheless I might be happy, nay, perhaps one of the happiest of men, were it not for the evil genius that has taken up his abode in my ears. Had I not read somewhere that no man ought voluntarily to quit life as long as he can do a good action, I should long since, by my own will, have ceased to live. Oh, how beautiful is life—but mine is poisoned for ever!”

Zelter, writing to Goethe in 1819, says:—“Beethoven is still in the country, but nobody knows where. He has just written from Baden to one of his friends at Vienna, and yet he is not at Baden. His temper is said to be insupportable; some, indeed, will have it that

he is mad. But it is easy to talk in that way, God forgive us! The poor man, it seems, is completely deaf. Figure such a situation—to see his fingers on the keys, and not hear a note! He gave a curious specimen of his absence of mind the other day. He went into a restaurateur's, sat down at a table, and after having remained pensive and motionless for an hour, called the waiter. 'What have I to pay?' 'Why, sir, you have had nothing yet—what would you please to have?' 'Bring me anything you like, and go about your business.'" "In spite of the faults found with Beethoven," says Zelter, in another letter of the same period, "with or without reason, he is, at Vienna, an object of great respect and curiosity. He had promised, on some matter of business, to call one morning at the shop of Steiner, the music-publisher. Steiner was eager to tell that the great man was coming, for the first time, to pay him a visit at his little shop, which will not hold more than five or six persons. More than fifty made their appearance, crowding about the door, and standing in the street. They consisted of artists, men of letters, and persons of distinction in various ways, all waiting to catch a glimpse of the man so much heard of, but so rarely seen. But they waited in vain: Beethoven, fatigued with a journey the day before, overslept himself and broke his appointment."

It may be supposed that a man of Beethoven's temper was by no means amenable to criticism. Sometimes his friends wished to persuade him to make retrenchments in his pieces, when, though beautiful, they seemed too long; but they seldom succeeded. Beethoven defended every bar with parental eagerness: and the critic, if he persisted, was sure to bring on himself some rough language, for Beethoven, when in a passion, spared nobody. Sometimes, however, he would listen to these remonstrances; but he did not yield without a stout debate, and would never consent to abridge a movement, though he would withdraw it altogether from the piece, and substitute a shorter one in its place. Thus, in the well-known sonata in C major (Op. 53), there was at first a long *andante* in F. Beethoven, after keen dis-

cussions as to the excessive length of this sonata, replaced the *andante* by the little introduction which now precedes the *rondo*, and published the *andante* separately.

The most violent dispute of this kind took place on the subject of his celebrated opera *Fidelio*. This piece, which was originally called *Leonora*, had small success when first produced on the stage. Indeed it may be said to have failed, for it was withdrawn after the third representation. Two years afterwards it was determined to revive it, and two of Beethoven's friends, who took a strong interest in its success, undertook to remodel the *libretto*, the faults of which had contributed much to the failure of the piece. But changes in the text demanded changes in the music; and curtailments, too, were necessary. Curtailments! who should be bold enough to propose curtailments to Beethoven?

By way of managing this ticklish matter, Prince Lichnowsky had a little meeting at his house to try over the music, and consider what changes were requisite. Besides the Prince and Princess, the party consisted of Messrs Collin and Breuning, the friends who had revised the *libretto*, the tenor singer Rœckel,* the bass singer Meyer, and the composer. At first Beethoven stood firm and defended his music bar by bar, without, however, losing his temper. But when Meyer began to declare that whole pieces must be cut out, such as the principal air for the part of *Pizarro*, saying that no singer could give it any effect, Beethoven flew into a rage, and stormed at the whole company. They succeeded, however, in pacifying him, and he agreed to give up this air and put another in its place. The air which he substituted is that very noble one which is now marked No. 7, in the score. Once brought into a complying mood, Beethoven became wonderfully tractable, and the whole affair was arranged to general satisfaction. This rehearsal, disputes included, lasted from seven in

* We have heard this respectable and excellent musician (who is now resident in London) describe this scene as Ries has done.

the evening till two in the morning. The Prince then ordered supper to be brought in, and the night ended merrily.

Beethoven immediately set about making the changes agreed on. Among the pieces cut out there was a duet for two sopranos, an air, and a trio; a prodigious sacrifice for Beethoven! The opera was reduced to two acts, and, in this shape, performed with the utmost applause. But Beethoven had enemies; a formidable cabal was raised against him; and the opera, notwithstanding its first reception, had again only three representations. Beethoven's disappointment was extreme. He was at this time in very straitened circumstances, and had reckoned on considerable advantage from the success of the piece. The failure of his hopes disgusted him with his art: and it was a long time before he got over it, and returned by degrees to his musical occupations.

The original failure of this exquisite opera is one of those occurrences which we too often meet with in the history of the art. It was too much in advance of the period when it was produced, and could not be understood by the mass of the public. This failure took place in 1805: ten years afterwards *Fidelio* was revived at Berlin, and hailed with enthusiasm; and it was speedily received with acclamations all over Germany. It was not known in England till 1832, when it was first performed in the original language, by the fine German company engaged that season at the Opera-house by the enterprising but unfortunate Mr Monck Mason; and we need hardly remind our musical readers of the success with which it was more recently brought out, in an English version, at Drury Lane, and of the impression produced upon a long succession of crowded audiences by the lamented Malibran's beautiful representation of the most interesting of all heroines. *Fidelio*, unfortunately for the musical stage, is Beethoven's sole dramatic work. It was said, during the latter years of his life, that he was engaged in the composition of another opera, entitled *Melusina*; but nothing has been heard of

it since his death, nor does it appear that any vestige of it was found among his papers.

Notwithstanding Beethoven's inaptitude for the mysteries of fugue and double counterpoint, and the consequent incompleteness of his scholastic studies, he seems at a very early age to have distinguished himself by his ability as an extemporaneous performer, supplying any deficiencies of learning and experience by native genius and inventive power. So early as the year 1790, while as yet he was pursuing his studies under an obscure teacher at Bonn, he made a short visit to Vienna, for the purpose of hearing Mozart, to whom he had letters of introduction. He played extempore before Mozart, who paid very little attention to the performance, imagining it to be a piece got by heart. At last the young musician, piqued by this indifference, begged Mozart to give him a subject. Mozart muttered to himself,—“Well, stay a little, I will try your metal;” and wrote down a chromatic fugue subject; which, taken backwards, contained a counter subject for a double fugue. Beethoven was not taken in. He worked upon the subject, the hidden properties of which he immediately discovered, for more than half an hour with such force, originality, and genius, that his hearer, more and more confounded, and almost breathless with attention, at last rose, and walking on tiptoe into the adjoining room, where some of his friends were sitting, said to them with great emotion,—“Attend to that young man; you will hear of him one day!”

Beethoven, in truth, was in a great measure self-taught. He was three-and-twenty when he went to pursue his studies in Vienna, and long before that period he had got far beyond the musicians of his native town of Bonn. He was thus left to himself, both as a composer and pianoforte-player, and consequently his style of performance was much more remarkable for force and effect than for taste and delicacy. The celebrated Abbé Sterkel (whose elegant works, now forgotten, are among the pleasantest musical reminiscences of our younger days) was the first who made

him aware of his deficiency in this respect. Beethoven, when attending the Elector on a journey, was introduced to Sterkel at Aschaffenburg, where this veteran musician was *maestro di capella*, and was received by him with kindness. Sterkel was by no means a powerful performer, but was distinguished by the grace and precision of his style. When he sat down to the pianoforte, Beethoven stood behind him motionless, with his eyes riveted on the hands which passed over the keys with so delicate and caressing a touch. When Sterkel had done, Beethoven was requested to play in his turn. He declined: but the conversation having fallen on an air with variations, which Beethoven had lately published, and Sterkel having made some remarks on its excessive difficulty, adding, that the author himself could not execute it in a satisfactory manner, Beethoven felt piqued, and asked for a sight of the piece. Sterkel could not find it, and said it was mislaid. Beethoven then began to play such of the variations as he could recollect, adding others extempore, in such a manner that Sterkel and everybody present were confounded. What was remarkable in this improvisation was, that Beethoven, suddenly adopting Sterkel's style of execution, played with a neatness and delicacy which he had never before exhibited. Beethoven, nevertheless, remained during his whole life a rough and slovenly player, and we have heard him described as such by some of the greatest musicians of the age. His increasing deafness, indeed, must have prevented him from acquiring nicety and precision of execution.

In his earlier days Beethoven was much indebted for happiness, as well as intellectual improvement, to an amiable family of Bonn, of the name of Breuning. Madame de Breuning was the widow of a Court Councillor, and had three sons, and a daughter who was afterwards married to Dr Wegeler, and is affectionately mentioned in Beethoven's correspondence with him under the name of Leonora. Madame de Breuning had a sincere affection for Beethoven, and used to treat him like one of her own family. Harshly treated by his father,

Beethoven felt himself happy in a house always open to him, and in which he was almost domesticated. Madame de Breuning's maternal kindness won his heart, and she gained an ascendancy over his wayward spirit which no other person ever possessed. In one respect only her influence failed; she never could conquer his repugnance to give lessons in music. His father, though not indigent, was by no means in easy circumstances; and Beethoven, therefore, found it necessary to take a few pupils. But the drudgery of teaching was intolerable to him. He, indeed, gave lessons to Madame de Breuning's daughter and one of her sons; and, in regard to them, friendship and gratitude made him punctual; but the case was different with his other pupils, whose lessons he used to shuffle off as much as he could. One day, Madame de Breuning having urged him very much to go and give his usual pianoforte lesson at the Austrian Ambassador's, which was opposite her house, Beethoven went away for that purpose; but, when he got to the Ambassador's door, his natural repugnance prevailed, and he returned to Madame de Breuning, saying to her, "For God's sake, madam, don't insist on my giving this lesson to-day, I will give two to-morrow." During his whole life Beethoven retained this dislike to teaching; and, indeed, never had any pupils (at least whom he acknowledged as such) but the Archduke Rudolph and his friend Ferdinand Ries.

Beethoven's intercourse with this excellent family conduced to his improvement as well as his happiness. Entirely engrossed with music (for his father neither knew nor cared for any other pursuit), he remained ignorant of literature, or any kind of general knowledge, till, under the roof of the Breunings, he acquired his first literary ideas, and contracted that taste for reading which he retained to the end of his life.

Ries's acquaintance with Beethoven began in 1800, when Beethoven was thirty, and in the height of his reputation. Ries was then fifteen, and had been sent by his father to Vienna, to profit by the instructions of his celebrated townsman. When he waited on Beethoven,

and presented his letter of introduction, Beethoven was busily employed on his oratorio, 'The Mount of Olives,' then about to be produced. He looked over the letter, and said, "I cannot at this moment write to your father; but pray tell him that I have not forgotten my mother's death—that will do for the present." Ries afterwards learned that his father, when Beethoven's mother died, had given assistance to the family, then in distressed circumstances. His subsequent conduct to Ries was kind and friendly in the extreme. Notwithstanding his unconquerable repugnance to teaching, which made him constantly refuse to take pupils, he devoted himself zealously to his young friend's education; and, what was still more remarkable, notwithstanding his hasty and impetuous temper, he gave Ries his lessons with the utmost mildness and patience, often making him repeat difficult passages, and even whole movements, ten times over. "In the variations in F major," says Ries, "I had to repeat the last part of the adagio *seventeen* times, Beethoven not being satisfied with a little cadenza, which I thought I played very well. This lesson lasted two hours."

Ries gives some interesting particulars respecting Beethoven's method of teaching.

"When I played the notes of a passage imperfectly," he says, "or touched too slightly notes which ought to have been well marked, Beethoven seldom found fault with me; but if I failed in expression, and did not observe the *crescendos* and other shades of meaning which give a piece its character, he used to get angry. The former fault, he would say, might be the effect of accident; but the latter argued a want of knowledge, sentiment, and attention. He himself, moreover, had sometimes the misfortune to strike a wrong note, even when playing in public."

Beethoven's performance was characteristic of his disposition—impetuous, forcible, and often indescribably expressive. Notwithstanding his freedom of manner, he kept very strict time, and very rarely hastened it. Sometimes, in *crescendo* passages, he

retarded it a little, which always produced a surprising effect. Ries adds (and the remark ought not to be lost upon those, among ourselves, who play Beethoven's music) that when he performed his published compositions he played them as they were written, hardly ever introducing any notes of embellishment. But it was in extemporizing that Beethoven's genius was displayed in all its strength. Ries, who knew the first pianists of the time, and who must be considered a thoroughly competent judge, affirms that in this respect Beethoven was unapproachable. Woe to any one who dared to contend with him on that ground!

When the famous Steibelt arrived at Vienna, preceded by a brilliant reputation, much interest was excited by the expected competition between two such artists. It was at a musical party given by Count Fries that the two rivals met for the first time. Beethoven played his trio in B flat (Op. 11), which had not been previously heard, but is now among the most popular of his works. Steibelt listened condescendingly, and said some civil things, with the air of a man sure of his own superiority. He then played a quintet of his own composition, and afterwards extemporized, producing much effect with his *tremolo* chords, which then were a novelty. Beethoven was pressed to play again, but refused.

A few days afterwards Count Fries had another party. Steibelt, after having, with much applause, played a new quintet, began a brilliant fantasia, for which he took, as a subject, the Italian air which forms the theme of Beethoven's variations in the trio above-mentioned. This was a pointed challenge; and Beethoven's friends sensible of its offensive meaning, urged him to take up the glove. Beethoven, not a little piqued at this defiance, got up and moved towards the instrument. Passing the music-stands, on which the parts of Steibelt's quintet were still lying, he took up the violoncello part and placed it on the pianoforte, turning it (either by accident or design) upside down. He then began to touch a few notes from the part before him, out of which he formed a subject; and, yielding to the inspiration of

the moment, poured forth such a torrent of bright and beautiful thoughts, that Steibelt, confounded and overwhelmed, left the room before he had finished. From that night Steibelt avoided Beethoven's presence, and never accepted an invitation, unless he were assured that his rival was not to be of the party.

Notwithstanding Beethoven's kindness of disposition, he was excessively irritable; and the fits of passion to which he gave way at most unseasonable times, often exposed him to annoyances and mortifications. At one of his concerts he produced, for the first time, his fantasia for the pianoforte, with orchestral accompaniments and a chorus, which has of late been repeatedly performed in London. The clarinet miscounted eight bars; and, as it was nearly a solo passage, the blunder was the more apparent. Beethoven started up in a rage, and abused the band loudly enough to be heard by the whole audience. "Once more!" he at last exclaimed in a voice of thunder; and the band, overawed by his stern looks and commanding tone, submissively obeyed. The piece was now executed with perfect accuracy and great success; but no sooner was the concert over than the performers, indignant at the treatment they had received, rose against him *en masse*, and declared that they would never again play in his presence. Their anger, however, was of short duration. Beethoven having soon afterwards finished a new composition, curiosity got the better of resentment, and they were very willing to perform it under the author's direction. Another scene of a similar kind took place afterwards; but this time the orchestra, enraged beyond measure, persisted in their refusal to play under the direction of Beethoven; so that Beethoven, obliged to leave the room, and yet desirous to hear the rehearsal of his piece, was compelled to remain in the anti-room. It was a long time before the quarrel could be made up.

At a musical party at the house of Count Browne, where there was a large assemblage of people of fashion, Beethoven and Ries were to play a pianoforte duet. They had scarcely begun, when a young nobleman

broke the general silence by talking to a lady who sat by him. Beethoven tried, by significant gestures, to stop this conversation; but finding himself unnoticed, he started up, pushed Ries's hands off the keys, and said loudly, "Für solche schweine spiel' ich nicht"—"I'll play no longer to such a set of hogs!" The confusion caused by this outbreak may be imagined. Anybody but Beethoven would have been turned out of the room; but he was a privileged man, and his rudeness was not only passed over, but he was requested to reseat himself at the instrument, which he obstinately refused to do. Ries was then asked to play a sonata, and was about to comply, but Beethoven forbade him to touch a note; and the scholar, fearful of the consequences of offending his master, durst not disobey his prohibition.

Fully sensible of the inestimable value of his instructions, Ries treated his master on every occasion with unbounded deference; but, with all his anxiety, he could not save himself from falling at last into disgrace. Beethoven, having finished a beautiful movement for the pianoforte, played it to Ries, who was so much delighted with it that he asked to hear it a second time. On his way home, Ries, passing the house of Prince Lichnowsky, went in, in order to tell the Prince of this new masterpiece. Remembering a considerable part of it, he played it to the Prince, who, being a good musician and having an excellent memory, was also able to retain a good many passages of it. Wishing to mystify the author, the Prince went to visit him, telling him he had come to let him hear a new *andante* which he had just composed. He began to play, and Beethoven was astonished to recognize his own composition. But his surprise speedily gave way to anger; for, remembering that nobody but Ries could have communicated this unpublished piece, he swore he would never again play in his presence, and he kept his word.

Some time afterwards the Prince had some musical friends to breakfast, among whom were Beethoven and Ries. The opera of *Fidelio*, then in rehearsal, was talked of, and the party agreed to adjourn to the composer's

lodgings, to hear some parts of the score on the pianoforte. Beethoven accordingly sat down to the instrument; but, before beginning to play, desired that Ries should leave the room. Ries obeyed with tears in his eyes; but the Prince, justly displeased at such treatment, of which he himself had been the cause, expressed himself warmly on the subject. A sharp altercation ensued; and the matter ended by Beethoven rising from the pianoforte and refusing to play to the company, who separated much disappointed. It is painful to add that Beethoven's obduracy remained inflexible; and that, from thenceforth, though in other respects they continued on a friendly footing, Ries never heard him play a note!

Independence was Beethoven's *summum bonum*; and his excessive desire to preserve it unimpaired, made him reject civilities and services which most people in his circumstances would have gratefully received. At one time he accepted for a short while an apartment in the house of his friend Prince Lichnowsky, and the use of his table; and the Prince, knowing how jealously he felt any appearance of neglect, ordered his servants, whenever they heard Beethoven's bell and his own at the same time, always to attend Beethoven's first. But no sooner did Beethoven discover that such an order had been given, than he immediately engaged a servant at his own expense, though at that time he could ill afford it.

Though he was by no means attentive to the rules of politeness towards others, yet he was punctilious in exacting them towards himself. One evening he was invited to a *soirée* at the house of an old Countess, whose name Ries does not mention. Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, one of the most distinguished amateur musicians of his time, and an enthusiastic admirer of Beethoven, was of the party.* After the concert, the company went to supper in another room. Beethoven fol-

* Prince Louis Ferdinand produced several musical compositions of great merit, particularly a set of beautiful trios for the pianoforte, violin, and violoncello, which are known in this country. He was killed at the battle of Jena.

lowed the guests, but found there was no place for him at table, the covers being laid only for the *noblesse* of the party. Irritated at this affront, he gave vent to his feelings in some pretty downright language, and retired abruptly. A few days afterwards Prince Louis Ferdinand gave a grand entertainment, to which Beethoven was invited. The old Countess, too, was present; but matters now took a different turn. When the company sat down to table, Beethoven was seated between the Prince and the Countess; a mark of distinction by which he was completely mollified, and so much pleased that he often talked of it to his friends. He was, indeed, more flattered by the marks of honour which he received from the great than might have been expected, from other parts of his character. When the King of Prussia sent him a gold snuffbox, he was very fond of showing it, and always remarked, that it was not an ordinary box, but one of those which were given only to Ambassadors.

He was totally ignorant of business and domestic economy. Constantly wrapped up in musical ideas, he knew very little of what was passing around him. At the same time, his deafness made him suspicious; he imagined he was imposed upon by people with whom he had dealings, and on such occasions the violence of his temper produced unpleasant scenes. He often had quarrels of this kind with the waiters of taverns and coffee-houses, whom he would abuse as thieves and pickpockets, and had then to make his peace by a handsome *douceur*. In places where he was known, people became used to his eccentricities, and gave him his own way.

It was when he was deeply engaged in some great composition that his fits of absence and abstraction were most remarkable. At such times his household affairs, simple as they were, were wholly neglected. Having dedicated a work to Count Browne, that nobleman, as a mark of gratitude, made him a present of a handsome horse. Beethoven was fond of his acquisition, and for a time rode out every day: but some musical occupations put a stop to his horsemanship, and he soon forgot

altogether that he was the owner of a horse. His servant took care of the forsaken steed, and turned his master's forgetfulness to good account, by letting out the animal at so much a day and pocketing the hire. Beethoven knew nothing of the matter till he was surprised by the appearance of bills for hay and corn, which he had to pay. He immediately got rid of the horse, but we are not told that he also got rid of his trusty domestic.

He had a passion for changes of residence. No sooner was he settled in a lodging than something about it displeased him, and he removed to another, often forgetting to give notice of his intention to quit—an oversight which sometimes got him into awkward scrapes. At one time he had four different lodgings on his hands, all of which he had to pay for. This affair occasioned a quarrel with one of his oldest friends, whom he accused of having undertaken to give one of these notices, and of having failed to do so. The estrangement lasted for some months, till, meeting by accident, matters were made up. Beethoven's suspicious temper made him prone to quarrel with his friends. If he took any offence, instead of explaining himself frankly, he became so cold and reserved, that it was difficult to discover what was his ground of umbrage; but if once an explanation took place, he was very ready to confess himself in the wrong, to express his regret, and endeavour to make amends for his error.

In his movements and gestures he was very ungraceful, and clumsy and awkward in every thing he did. He seldom took anything up without letting it fall, and often broke valuable articles. When writing at the pianoforte, he would overturn the ink glass upon the instrument. In shaving, he used to cut himself unmercifully, but he never would allow a barber to perform this operation. Ries adds another remarkable circumstance—he never could learn to keep time in dancing.

We have already said that Beethoven was flattered by the attentions of the great, but he would never descend to adulation, or pay homage to any one whom he conceived to be unworthy of it. A remarkable instance

of this nobleness of spirit is mentioned by Ries, in whose words we give it:—

“In 1802, Beethoven, then residing at Heilingstad, a village near Vienna, wrote his third symphony, known under the title of the *Sinfonia Eroica*. Beethoven, in composing, had frequently a definite object in view, though he sometimes ridiculed descriptive music, especially when it professed to paint objects minutely. Haydn’s *Creation* and *Seasons* were often the objects of his sarcasms, though he always acknowledged the general merit of that composer. In the symphony in question, Beethoven had in view Bonaparte, then First Consul, whose character, at that time, he greatly esteemed, and whom he used to compare to the most celebrated Consuls of Rome. I myself, and many of his friends, have seen on his table a fair copy of the score, with the word “Bonaparte” by way of title, and his own name, *Luigi van Beethoven*, at the bottom of the page. There was not a word more, and I do not know whether the blank space between the names was to have been filled up. I was the first who brought to him the news that Bonaparte had declared himself Emperor. He listened indignantly, and exclaimed,—‘He is a mere ordinary mortal after all! He is going to trample all the rights of man under his feet, and to become a tyrant, to gratify his ambition.’ So saying, he took up the symphony, tore the title-page in pieces, and threw it on the ground. The first page was recopied, and the piece received the title of *Sinfonia Eroica*.”

Beethoven’s friend, the Chevalier Seyfried, gives the following account of his musical opinions:—“Beethoven, unless in the small circle of his intimate friends, did not allow himself to express his opinions of other musicians. He regarded Cherubini as the greatest living dramatic composer, and Handel as the master of masters, considering his limited means and great effects. Mozart’s *chef d’œuvre*, he thought, was the *Zauberflöte*, because, in that work, Mozart was thoroughly German, while *Don Juan* was too much in the Italian style, and Beethoven conceived that so scandalous a subject was degrading to the art. In regard to several other celebrated com-

posers of the time, he was severe as well as unjust in his opinions. He never could perceive the merit of Weber and Rossini." Among all composers (as we are informed by Ries), Handel and Mozart were those whom Beethoven esteemed the most, and, next to them, Sebastian Bach. If he had music in his hands, on his table, or on his pianoforte, it was sure to be some masterpiece of one or other of those great composers.

Beethoven was all his life in narrow circumstances. It is well known that, a short time before his death, he applied for and received pecuniary assistance from the London Philharmonic Society, though it turned out that he had died possessed of money and effects to the amount of something less than 1,000*l.* sterling. The good people of Vienna chose to be much displeased that Beethoven should have had recourse to English generosity for aid at a time when he was by no means in want of it. Had he needed pecuniary assistance, they said, he ought to have made his situation known to them, and not to foreigners. But, notwithstanding this fine talking, it is undeniable that these same Austrians permitted the greatest of their musicians to live among them in a state of penury of which they could not have been ignorant—a fact which is now sufficiently established by Beethoven's own letters. Who can read unmoved such passages as the following?—

In a letter dated 22d November, 1815, accompanying several compositions sent to Ries for publication in London, Beethoven says—

"I pray you earnestly, my dear Ries, to push this affair, that I may get the money; I have great need of it. I have lost 600 florins of my yearly pension. I pay 1000 florins of rent, and you may conceive the hardship which arises from the excessive depreciation of paper money.* My poor brother Charles is dead: he had an unthrifty wife, and had for some years been consumptive, and I may say that in helping him I have spent 10,000 florins; no great matter for an Englishman, but a great deal for a poor German. My poor brother was much changed in his latter days; but it is

* At this time the florin was worth less than a shilling English.

now a great satisfaction to me that I did all I could to preserve his life."

In a letter of the 8th March, 1816, Beethoven says--

"I am late in answering you, but I have been unwell, and very busy. I have as yet got no part of the ten gold ducats, and I begin to have doubts of English generosity. The Prince Regent, too, has not even reimbursed me for the expense of copying the *Battle Symphony*, which I sent him, nor have I even received a word of thanks for it. My pension is 3,400 florins in paper: I pay 1,000 florins of rent; my servant and his wife cost me 900 florins; so you may calculate how much I have remaining. I should be very glad to be employed to write something for the Philharmonic Society."

In April 1819, Beethoven sent Ries a sonata (op. 106) to be sold to a London publisher. His letter concludes thus:

"This sonata was written in very painful circumstances. It is hard to have to write for daily bread, and this is my situation at present.—As to my journey to London, we shall speak of it another time. The only salvation for me would be to get out of this unhappy and distressing position, in which I cannot recover my health, nor do what I might do under more favourable circumstances."

The money which Beethoven expected for this sonata not having arrived, he wrote again, on the 25th of May—

"Never have I been in such embarrassment, and all through the benefits I have lavished on other men. Do not forget the quintet and the sonata—nor the money for them; I mean *the honorarium, with honour, or without.*"

Lastly, in a letter of the 5th of September, 1825, Beethoven says—"If I were not so poor, and obliged to live by my pen, I should ask nothing from the Philharmonic Society; but, in the situation in which I am, I must expect the price of my symphony."

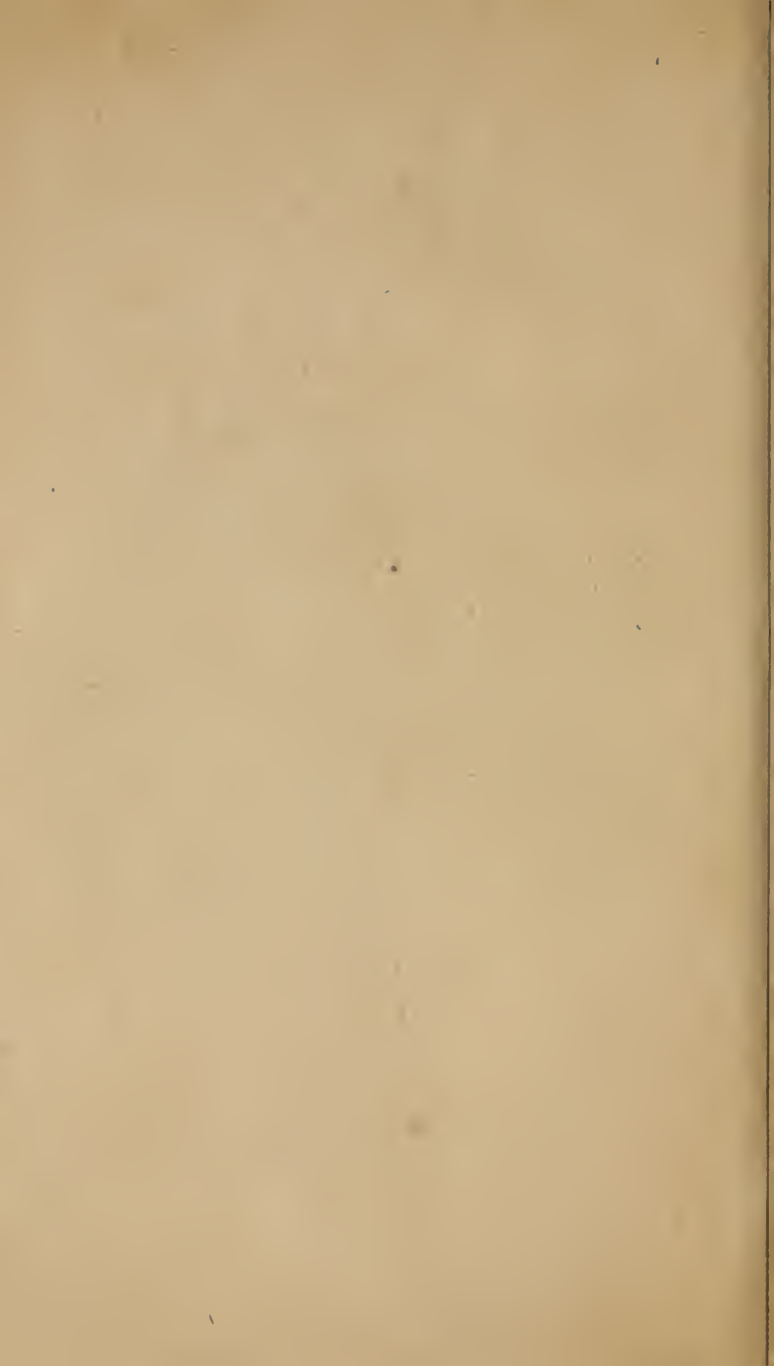
These affecting passages afford evidence, only too ample, of the unhappy circumstances in which this illustrious man passed his days. If he did contrive, in a life of toil and privation, to scrape together the pittance

of which he died possessed, what is that to the purpose?— Fallen into the vale of years, with broken health and decayed powers, was his possession of the means of existence for two or three years sufficient to dispel the “thick-coming fancies,” the visions of penury and destitution which haunted his mind? And could he reasonably expect sympathy, or effectual aid, from a people from whom he had met with nothing but indifference and neglect?

“Germany,” to use the language of a recent work,* “though a musical land, is far from being, as is very commonly supposed, the paradise of musicians. Mozart struggled all his life with difficulties, and was obliged to toil incessantly, not for fame, but for daily bread. His widow was saved from destitution by her second marriage with a respectable man, who became, too, a father to her dead husband’s children. His sister, the celebrated girl who shared the triumphs of his childhood, and whose name is for ever associated with his memory, died a few years ago in old age, and in such extreme penury that she was actually supported by charity. Beethoven lived unpatronised by the great and neglected by the public, barely able to subsist by a life of labour and parsimony, unknown and unheeded among his countrymen, even while his great name was resounding through Europe, and all because his transcendent genius was unaccompanied by the suppleness of the courtier and the arts of the man of the world. Let our musicians think a little on these things before they join in the common cry against their own country, and repine that ‘their lot was not cast in the pleasant places’ of Germany.”

* *Memoirs of the Musical Drama.*







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